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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000594

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SCUL](#) [IN](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: INDIA'S SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE DOMINATES MUSLIM  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE IRAQ ELECTION

Classified By: DCM Robert O. Blake, Jr., Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: Indian Shias are excited about the prospect of a Shia government in Iraq, revere Ayatollah Sistani and support the January 30 election. This does not mean, however, that they are pro-American, as they also want US troops to depart Iraq as soon as possible and Iraq and Iran to have close and friendly ties. A leading Shia cleric reflected the views of the larger community when he asserted that India's Sunnis do not share these views and distrust the Shia ascent to power in Iraq, with some harboring quiet sympathy with the insurgency and its call for an election boycott. Although influential in their stronghold in Lucknow, the Shia are a relatively small and economically disadvantaged community in India (numbering an estimated 14 million), and as a result, their views regarding events in Iraq will not be the last word on Indian reaction to the Iraq elections. However, we will seek to encourage them to project their support for upcoming elections to wider Indian audiences. End Summary.

Zahir Iftikhari  
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2. (C) Zahir Iftikhari is an influential Shia cleric from Lucknow. His grandfather was a famous Shia scholar, who wrote a number of influential books on Islam. Iftikhari is playing a prominent role in recent Indian Shia moves to leave the current Muslim Personal Law Board and establish a strictly Shia organization. He spent seventeen years studying Islam in Iraq and is a fluent Arabic speaker, although he does not speak English. With his sterling reputation and large following, Iftikhari often speaks on behalf of India's Shia community. Like many Indian Shia, he follows Iraqi politics in minute detail. He met with Poloff on January 20.

Iraqi Shias' Big Day  
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3. (C) Iftikhari asserted that Indian Shias strongly support the January 30 Iraqi elections, and predicted that there would be a large Shia turnout. January 30 is a Shia holiday and Iraqi Shias are likely to be out and about and in a festive mood. Iftikhari expected Iraqi Shias to ignore the Sunni boycott call, and looked forward to a peaceful assumption of power by their community, after having been denied political rights under Sunni rule for so long.

4. (C) Iftikhari was adamant that Iraqi Shia would not establish an Iranian style theocracy when they assume power in Baghdad. Pointing out that the Shia had experienced repression, murder and destruction of their holy places under Saddam, he projected that they would be munificent towards the Sunni, not attempt to gain retribution, and make concessions to head off communal violence. Iftikhari downplayed the likelihood of a Sunni/Shia civil war after the election, asserting that Baathist supporters of Saddam are behind most of the terrorism, and that a quick trial and execution of Saddam and his associates would end the violence and the threat of civil war.

Minority Within a Minority  
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5. (C) According to Iftikhari, Shias in India tolerate their Sunni brethren, but the Sunnis have no tolerance for Shia Islam, and treat Shias as second class citizens. He asserted that this difference is reflected in the attitudes of the two communities regarding the Iraqi election, with Indian Sunni supporting a boycott and delay and Shias eager to see the election go forward as planned. Likewise, he noted, Indian Shia have no sympathy with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and other Sunnis in Iran who are committing acts of terrorism, implying that Indian Sunnis are more equivocal on this score.

6. (C) Iftikhari asserted that Indian Shias are united behind Ayatollah Sistani and will adhere to his calls to support the Iraq election and to create a secular state. Indian Shia also want strict controls on the power of the Iraqi government to interfere with the personal lives of Iraq's citizens, as the Indian Shia are a minority within the larger Indian Muslim minority, and realize the importance of tolerance.

17. (C) Although Iran is the leading Shia nation, Iftikari pointed out, that its government has little or no credibility with Indian Shias, who view it as too orthodox and authoritarian. Despite this, Indian Shia praise Ayatollah Khomeini for fighting only against Iraq's Baathist government and never supporting terrorism against Sunni civilians. He also claimed that Khomeini only overthrew the Shah after his despotism became unbearable, and with the "complete support of Iran's population." He predicted that after the election there would be much closer interaction between Iran and Iraq, as "99 percent of Iranians" will come to Iraq to visit the holy places.

Comment  
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18. (C) Iftikhari is only one of many Shia leaders who have told Poloff of their support for the elections in Iraq. However, this does not necessarily translate into backing for continued American involvement there. Most Shia expect Sistani to be the real power in Iraq after the polls, that he will call for the coalition forces to withdraw, and that the Iraqi government will distance itself from the US after our troops depart. Sunni contacts confirm Iftikari's assessment, in that they largely oppose American involvement in Iraq and the elections, which they view as a Shia power grab. India's shia -- especially the clerical hierarchy in Lucknow -- maintain a tight link to Iraq, and were a factor in the GOI's 2002 decision not to deploy military forces. However, the Shia are a minority within the Muslim community (estimated at 10 percent of 140 million), so their view is not the last word on Indian reaction to the Iraq elections.

19. (U) Minimize Considered  
MULFORD